

How Harvard Divinity Teaches Hate



(PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE FREE PRESS; IMAGE BY ERIC LAFFORGUE VIA GETTY IMAGES)

I attended the country's first nonsectarian theological school and got an unexpected immersion in the antisemitism overtaking higher education.

By Robert L. Friedman



09.23.24 — Israel and Antisemitism

At the age of 63, when I enrolled as a master's degree student at Harvard Divinity School in the fall of 2022, I anticipated two years to contemplate the great works of the past and engage in stimulating discussions with brilliant teachers and students. That, I accomplished. What I didn't expect was that the school would also provide a chilling

262 333

education in the contemporary antisemitism that's on its way to overtaking higher education.

I was raised a Reform Jew in Atlanta in a family of stalwart Zionists—both parents were avid moral and financial supporters of Israel. My religious observance waned for many years, but over the past decade has been reenergized.

Before I retired and decided to embark on theological studies, I was the chief investment officer of a \$25 billion mutual fund. I was attracted to Harvard Divinity because of its avowed religious pluralism. The school was established [in 1816](#) as the country's first nonsectarian theological school, and today, while it still prepares some students for the clergy, it also attracts leaders from many fields in order to enrich their understanding of religion.

I don't think of myself as a naive person. But as my time at Harvard Divinity School unfolded, I was shocked to discover there was a hidden mission in some corners of the school: a fervent opposition to the existence of Israel to the point of encouraging its elimination.

I arrived a year before the atrocities of October 7, 2023, yet there was a clear foreshadowing of the anti-Israel explosions to come, given a widespread, university-wide focus on Israel—a contemptuous obsession inflicted on no other country. For example, there is an annual student-sponsored Israeli Apartheid Week, with [a campus installation](#) calling for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel, accompanied by a display in a central Harvard plaza stating, “There is no Zionist state without racism, colonialism, ethnic cleansing.”

The delegitimization and demonization of Israel is embedded in the divinity school's recently founded Religion and Public Life Program. The program's offerings included the [Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative](#),

which provided a field study seminar titled, “Learning in Context: Narratives of Displacement and Belonging in Israel/Palestine.” This seminar brought students to Israel and the West Bank.

Since Harvard welcomes students to take classes from schools and departments across the university, Religion and Public Life explicitly sought graduate students from influential programs, stating, “This course is open to ALL Harvard graduate students and especially salient for current or aspiring government officials, humanitarian aid workers, journalists, educators, public health officials, legal scholars, human rights and/or environmental advocates, artists, and design planners who are eager to think in fresh ways about seemingly intractable challenges in an interdisciplinary context.”

When these students returned from nearly two weeks in the Middle East, they were encouraged to make presentations on campus to spread the anti-Israel message.

And that they did. In a March 2023 video posted on the divinity school’s website, five of the students who participated in the initiative describe their experiences in Israel and Palestinian territories. All fervently condemn Israel. One divinity student, who describes herself as an “anti-Zionist Jew,” discusses her struggle about whether to celebrate Shabbat in Jerusalem because “Israel tried to convince me to engage Jewishly in order to feed its agenda of suppression, control, and colonial power.”

Another divinity student declares, “I wear my keffiyeh every Thursday for Keffiyeh Thursdays. I bring up Israel/Palestine in my classes. I talk about it with friends, and I post on social media. . . . What happens at Harvard can be a huge precedent for other schools to follow.”

The Religion and Public Life program sponsored a striking number of anti-Israel events, ranging from lectures to student presentations to book

events. From 2022 to 2023, my first full academic year, it hosted, co-hosted, or advertised 16 pro-Palestinian events, by my count; in my second year, 20—almost all of which occurred *after* the horrors of October 7.

Here's [a typical notice](#) from spring 2024, discussing an upcoming book talk by author Mitri Raheb, the founder and president of Dar al-Kalima University in Bethlehem: "*Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* challenges the weaponization of biblical texts to support the current settler-colonial state of Israel. Raheb argues that some of the most important theological concepts—Israel, the land, election, and chosen people—must be decolonized in a paradigm shift. . . ."

Each event I attended blamed Israel solely for every facet of Palestinian dysfunction. Each described the 1948 founding of Israel as an "illegal occupation."

In April 2023, I went to [an event](#) featuring talks by some of the more than 170 Harvard graduate students who had organized their own trip to the West Bank. Projected on a screen: "Bear Witness to apartheid, to settler colonialism, to military occupation, to erasure, to ethnic cleansing, to solidarity, to resistance, to Palestine."

A culturally diverse group of 40 speakers each presented a three-minute synopsis of their findings to a packed house—and each delivered a contemptuous broadside against Israel. There was no effort to understand the Israeli perspective, no weighing of contrary arguments.

The attendees responded to each speaker with explosive applause. Given that these Harvard grad students have enhanced odds for overachievement in their respective fields, it chills me to think about the fate of Israel in the hands of such people.



Then came fall semester and the atrocities committed by Hamas against innocent Israelis. Within hours, even before all of the 1,200 murdered had been identified, [a group](#) of more than 30 Harvard student organizations, several affiliated with the divinity school, put out a letter stating they “hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence” and that the “apartheid regime is the only one to blame.”

The signatories from the divinity school included the Harvard Divinity School Muslim Association, Harvard Divinity School Students for Justice in Palestine, and Harvard Jews for Liberation. This last group was founded at the divinity school in 2021, [and calls itself](#) a “spiritual and political space for anti-Zionist and non-Zionist Jews at Harvard.”

Four days after Hamas’s slaughter, five administrators of the Religion and Public Life program used their [regular email blast](#) to blame Israel, writing: “Start with the rockets fired into Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023 and not with the illegal occupation of Palestinian land by Israel and the blockade of Gaza since 2007, and you have an entirely different story. . . When these ‘decades of oppression’ are left out of the story about Hamas’ horrendous attack on Israeli civilians, a narrative about an ‘innocent’ state of Israel’s right to ‘defend’ itself against supposedly ‘unprovoked’ aggression is legitimized.”

Translation: Hamas may have committed barbaric acts, but can you blame them? And let’s try and be clear-eyed that the supposed victims—the Israelis—can never be considered innocent.

Their email prompted the acting dean of the divinity school [to declare](#) that the signatories spoke only for themselves. But in case the program’s relentless condemnation of Israel wasn’t clear enough, in that same email, there were notices for three upcoming anti-Israel events.

The rest of the school year saw endless anti-Israel protests. Posters of Israeli hostages kidnapped by Hamas were covered in red paint. Posts on an anonymous social media app requiring a Harvard email were often overtly antisemitic—one said the massacre of hundreds of young Israelis at the Nova music festival was carried out by the Israel Defense Forces, another that “all of you Zionists are the same. Killers and rapists of children!”

So a task force to address antisemitism was formed, and a congressional hearing on the matter brought the new president of Harvard, Claudine Gay, to testify, a performance widely considered a disaster and one that contributed to the swift termination of her presidency.

Days after Gay’s testimony, a visiting scholar at the divinity school, Rabbi David Wolpe, tendered a public resignation from the task force. He wrote that he realized, “I cannot make the sort of difference I had hoped.” He added this blistering statement:

“... the system at Harvard along with the ideology that grips far too many of the students and faculty, the ideology that works only along axes of oppression and places Jews as oppressors and therefore intrinsically evil, is itself evil.

Ignoring Jewish suffering is evil. Belittling or denying the Jewish experience, including unspeakable atrocities, is a vast and continuing catastrophe. Denying Israel self-determination as a Jewish nation accorded unthinkingly to others is endemic, and evil.”

When representatives from Harvard’s antisemitism task force visited the divinity school to gather information, of the roughly 20 students present, all (except me) described themselves as anti-Zionist activists or as indifferent to Israel. Our hosts did an exemplary job of letting everyone have their say, but afterward, when all had departed except me and one

interlocutor, he was aghast. A Jewish Harvard professor in his mid-50s, he said to me, “I fear for Israel.”

Last January a fellow divinity student named Alexander “Shabbos” Kestenbaum and several other Jewish students at Harvard filed a federal suit against the university for its failure to curb the expressions of hate that often veered into harassment and threats, and its refusal to enforce its own rules.

In a motion to dismiss Kestenbaum’s suit, Harvard acknowledged “incidents of antisemitic vitriol and vandalism” but offered the defense that “Tackling a problem as invidious and enduring as antisemitism requires a deliberate, multidimensional effort.” U.S. District Court Judge Richard Stearns was not impressed. In August he allowed the case to continue, writing that “Harvard failed its Jewish students.”

To try to understand the perspective of the young anti-Israel activists who were so certain about what is a long, intractable, tragic situation, I chatted with many of them, read their online posts, and did a lot of eavesdropping. One thing was universal—they had no interest in discussing contrary views with me, even though I criticize Israel’s government and express concern for the suffering of the Palestinian people. (I also acknowledge some young people might not be eager to talk with a pro-Israel classmate older than their parents.)

It turns out that my thwarted attempts at engagement echoed what Harvard’s newly announced president, Alan Garber, recognizes is drastically missing at his school. This past August, Garber told prospective Harvard students that college campuses have seen a “change” in the willingness to share dissenting opinions. “It’s a change that we intend to reverse here,” Garber said.

So Harvard has added a new [essay prompt](#) to its undergraduate application: “Describe a time when you strongly disagreed with someone about an idea or issue. How did you communicate or engage with this person? What did you learn from this experience?”

All this might come as news to the leaders of the Religion and Public Life program. I still receive their emails, including one at the beginning of this school year promoting a book event featuring two [anti-Zionist authors](#).

Harvard has an obligation to address how it has institutionalized the obsessive demonization of a single nation—a hatred that is embedded at its divinity school. Garber has a lot of work ahead of him.



Robert L. Friedman is a former finance executive and a recent graduate of Harvard Divinity School. He sponsors programs at Tikvah and the Yiddish Book Center. And read Carole Hooven's piece, “[Why I Left Harvard](#).”

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Dev Sep 26



This article made my stomach hurt. Sometimes I wish Israel would find 8,000 square miles in some other undeveloped land. Not out of fear or agreement they shouldn't be where they are (because they do belong there). But, as a "Fine. Have it your way." Then move taking their educational institutions, hospitals/medicine, technology and businesses with them. And then leave the land how they found it: undeveloped, backwards, and empty. This isn't about loving the people of Palestine. This is about hating Jews.

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Jon Sep 25

Chilling condemnation of Harvard. Unfortunately, emblematic of what is happening at other elite educational institutions as well. Strange that the very institutions which were once symbols of the liberal western tradition, are today those from which ignorance, hate and anti-liberal ideas are being trumpeted.

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